

GREENPOINT

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Thornburg", is written over a horizontal line.

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Greenpoint was first conceived of as a Bible Study based on fictional characters I created. This Bible Study was a summer long program for a high school youth group I spent the summer serving as Youth Minister. I designed and "built" the town of Greenpoint, adding new locations each week, and centering the discussion on the situations of the characters (such as racism at the September Celebration with Dexter, or dating with Karen). The main character, Jim Hawkins, is easy for teens to relate to, as he struggles to find happiness and meaning in his high school life. Jim learns several hard lessons in his time in Greenpoint, Illinois, but he also finds out what is truly important as he discovers God's role in his life.

CHAPTER 1

"Greenpoint: the town that God forgot."

That was the first thing I said after stepping out of the car. The day was hot and bright, and I was very unhappy to be spending it, the first of many, in Greenpoint, Illinois, population 5000. It's ironic, really, that my first statement about my new home involved God. As all parents know, teen-agers know everything. In that respect, I was a very typical teen-ager. However, I was always the first to admit that if there was one thing (or one person, actually) that I knew nothing about, and had no wish to know anything about, it was God. Funny how things change.

My name's Jim Hawkins, and this is my life. Well, a part of it anyway. When we first moved to Greenpoint, I was 17 years old. I was the only child of Mr. and Mrs. Joe Hawkins, Jr. Dad was born and raised right here in Greenpoint, graduated from the University of Illinois, and immediately moved to Atlanta, Georgia to chase down his dream of being a high school history teacher. Some dream. Mom, formerly known as Mary Sullivan, had lived in Atlanta her whole life, and was patiently awaiting her dream of meeting a nice man with a future and raising a family. Joe and Mary met in 1974, and her dream came true, sort of. Dad was 31, and Mom, 25, and before you knew it, they were married and expecting. Soon, along came little Jimmy, and with my arrival, Mom's dreams of a big family departed. I don't know if I was too big, too late, or just

too darned difficult, but somehow my birth erased Mom's ability to have any more children. Sometimes I wonder if she ever forgave me for that.

Life was good in Atlanta. Heck, it was great. I was pretty popular, if I do say so myself. Lots of friends, lots of fun. I never had a real steady girlfriend, just lots of short-term relationships. It seemed like there was always another girl just around the corner. And, of course, there was baseball. Beloved baseball. That was my life. At the time, I couldn't imagine not living in a town with a major league team. I probably didn't miss but a few of the Brave's home games in recent years. Dad had been a home-town hero athlete. He was the star center fielder for the Greenpoint Falcons his entire high school career. So, as soon as I was old enough to wear a glove, Dad set about making me a ball player. I never missed a season, from tee-ball on. I know a lot of kids play a sport they hate for years, just to please their parents, but that was never the case with me. I guess in that respect I was definitely my father's son. I was starting shortstop on the varsity team my freshman year, and finished my junior year with a .385 batting average for the season. Needless to say, Dad was pleased. And so were the coaches. And so were the college recruiters who had already started calling. I could probably have gotten a free ride at any college in the South. Yes sir, things were looking good for Jim Hawkins. And then we moved to Greenpoint.

It was June 14 of the summer before my senior year when

Dad got the news. The school corporation had been hit with a severe budget cut, and there had to be some lay-offs. I don't need to tell you who didn't make the cut. For a long time, Dad just wandered around in a daze. He literally had no clue of what to do next. Of course, all I could think of was who was going to pay my car insurance. I really wasn't very good at thinking of others.

The next bunch of wondrous news came on July 9. Grandpa Hawkins, Joe Sr., Dad's dad, whatever you want to call him, had just had a heart attack. The doctors said that he had a 50/50 chance of surviving. Well, Dad and Mom immediately picked up and went. Not knowing how long they were going to be away, I was left at home with Mom's folks checking up on me every day.

This was a good thing. Mom called every day to check up on me, too, and she always got the same response.

"Yes, Mom, everything's fine. No, Mom, that's just the TV (hold it down you guys, my mom's on the phone). Just take as long as you need, I'm okay."

They were in Greenpoint for a little over two weeks, two of the best weeks of my life. My pals and I whooped it up, hard. There is nothing, and I mean nothing, like having your parents take off and leave you the house. However, all good things must come to an end.

When Mom and Dad came through the door, Dad had that crazy look in his eyes. That was my first warning. I wanted to ask what was up immediately, but in Mary Hawkin's house, there are

certain procedures that simply must be followed. When you come home, you unpack those bags, or you put away those groceries, or do whatever it is you have to do to eliminate the blemish in Mom's immaculate household. So for two long, agonizing hours I sat and waited for news that I was certain would forever change my life. I had always had a very active imagination, and very little patience for Mom's stupid house rules. By the time Dad called me into his study and told me to sit down, I had blown this thing up to a disaster of biblical proportions. I was right.

"Jim," he said, still with that crazy look in his eyes, "I'm not quite sure how to tell you this."

"Just straight out is usually the best way, Dad." I know, it wasn't very respectful, but Dad, being a teacher, had a natural talent for turning a simple explanation into an epic tale. Being on the brink of frenzy already, I had to get him to talk quick, or I'd never know what had driven me insane.

"You're right, of course. Alright, son, here it is: we're moving to Greenpoint."

The earth trembled violently. Storm clouds filled the sky. The oceans raged against the coastlines. Volcanoes suddenly erupted across the nation, sending thousands to fiery deaths. The stars fell from the sky, as skyscrapers tumbled to the ground. Finally, the entire North American continent collapsed and sank into the sea, exterminating millions of lives in apocalyptic fury.

"What?"

"We're moving to Greenpoint, Jim. Your Grandpa's not going to be able to run his business anymore, and your Uncle Bob's not interested in giving up his career to do it. That leaves me. I've been looking for an excuse to get us up there again, and this looks like it. Won't it be great?!"

"Uh, yeah, sure Dad. Will you excuse me? I don't feel so good."

As the dust and ash cleared, I could see the ravaged remains of my world. All that was left was a barren wasteland, devoid of all life and hope. Central to all the carnage stood a sign that read, 'WELCOME TO GREENPOINT, ILLINOIS pop. 5000.'

Numb with fear, I retreated to my room. Safe under my Atlanta Braves comforter, I contemplated the awesome events of the past 90 seconds. In less than two minutes, life as I knew it had been irrevocably destroyed.

In the next few weeks, the Hawkins family worked feverishly to pack up all their earthly belongings and wrap up all their unfinished business in Atlanta. For me, this meant collecting the addresses of and promising to write to a seemingly endless number of females. I remember very clearly that it seemed like a big weight tied around my neck. That was the first time that my lifestyle had ever seemed like a burden. Then there were the good-byes to all my friends and team-mates. Looking back, I think I handled it very well. Of course, those girls and those friendships were nothing like I would discover in the near future.

When the time finally came to go, I just went. An air

of grim acceptance had come over me. My fate, crunchy as it was, was totally out of my hands, and I wasn't going to whine about it. I was okay as I backed my Le Sabre out of the drive for the last time. Following Mom and Dad and the U-Haul truck through the old neighborhood was fine. I even congratulated myself on my toughness. But as we passed Fulton County Stadium, home of my beloved Braves, I began to feel cold, and then numb. I couldn't even feel my heart beat, and that feeling stuck with me all the way to Greenpoint.

And that's what I was still feeling when I stepped out of the car in my new driveway. As I looked up and down Milton Street, the August sun beat down mercilessly on everything. But still I felt cold. What the heck kind of life was I supposed to build here?

School was to begin the day after tomorrow. If I was lucky, I could at least get all my junk unpacked and arranged before then. At least then I would only have to deal with one crisis at a time. I've never felt as alone as I did at that moment, but I knew that I'd better get started if I was going to have any chance whatsoever of pulling this thing off. I stood there for a long time.

CHAPTER 2

To me, the first bell of the school year is the most phenomenally depressing sound there is. This one was the worst of all. It's hollow clanging echoed deep inside me, screaming out "Welcome to hell, welcome to hell, welcome to hell." I don't think I'd ever been as depressed as I was walking up the sidewalk to the front doors of that place. Greenpoint High School, home of the Falcons. "Great," I thought to myself, "I'm a Falcon."

As I entered the main hall, every eye turned toward me. In the five minutes it took me to find my locker, I came to a realization: everyone knew everyone else. Everyone, that is, but me. I was the new kid. The center of attention. Funny how I used to enjoy being the leader of the pack back in Atlanta, but here...no way. This was the last thing I wanted. Now, these first couple of hours would determine the way these people would see me for the rest of my senior year.

Now if that isn't foreshadowing of impending doom, I don't know what is. I had established where my locker was, and was searching for my homeroom when it happened. Reading room numbers, not paying attention, I walked right into a concrete wall. It was wearing a letter jacket. The monogrammed name was mere inches below my eye level.

"Bull."

I swear to God, that's what it said! You can imagine my alarm. I had just started to make eye contact when he shoved me. Hard. I fell against a plain, good old fashioned wall

of lockers. Not a letter jacket on them. The beast spoke:

"Hey, watch where you're going, jerk-off!"

Yes, this man was definitely a football player. It was so stereotypical I wanted to laugh. I tried the direct approach.

"Sorry about that, big guy. I was just trying to find my homeroom, and I wasn't paying attention. My fault."

"Damn straight it's your fault! You're the new guy everybody's talking about, ain't you? The big baseball star from Georgia. Well, let me clear something up for you right now. In Greenpoint, football is the sport. The only people who play baseball are the wussies too small to wear a helmet."

Well, that was that. I could have handled anything he could have said about me, my family, or my dog. But baseball...

"Well, let me clear something up for you, 'Bull,' in Atlanta, the only people who don't play baseball are the dumb football jocks who aren't smart enough to know which way to run around the bases."

And that was all it took. The bull charged. That moment, I knew exactly how everyone in the school was going to see me for the rest of the year: as a corpse. I really wasn't much of a fighter, and I had picked a REALLY bad time to overlook that particular shortcoming.

Fortunately, Bull and I didn't fight that day. Just before he reached me, another fairly large guy stepped between us. His voice was full of authority.

"Back off, Bull, he's with me."

Bull stopped short. "What? What the crap is this?"

Thompson, do have any idea what you're messing with?"

My savior was very conservative with his response. "I know exactly what I'm messing with. We've been practicing together since seventh grade. Do me a favor and let this one lie, okay?"

Whoever he was, Bull seemed to have a lot of respect for him. "Alright, I'm gone. I'll see you on the field." He glared at me. "Looks like you lucked out, cream-puff. Next time..."

He didn't need to finish. I got the idea. I couldn't help but shudder as he pushed past the onlookers and rumbled down the hall. My new friend turned to me.

"Well, I guess you're with me. Where you headed?" He smiled.

I couldn't help but smile back. He was a likable guy. "I was looking for Room 110 before Conan the Thrusting came my way."

He visibly brightened. "Hey, you're in my homeroom. C'mon, it's just down the hall. I'm guessing you're Jim Hawkins, right? My name's Freddy. Freddy Thompson."

"Okay, Freddy. It's cool to meet a friendly face. How'd you know my name?"

"Word travels fast around here. Small town life, you know?"

I chuckled. "Actually, I have no idea. I've never lived anywhere but Atlanta. I have no clue how life is supposed to work around here."

"Well, it's probably not as different as you think. I'll introduce you to some of my friends. They're cool guys."

"Boy, I would appreciate that big-time. I don't know anyone in this place. That would be great."

I really liked this guy. Looking back, I probably would have liked anyone who was friendly to me at that point. We made our way to our homeroom, where I was once again seriously eye-balled by everyone there. Two very different looking guys smiled at Freddy as he walked in and waved him over.

"Hey, guys. I want you to meet Jim Hawkins, fresh from Atlanta, Georgia. I think he could use some friends."

The first one to extend his hand was a very happy looking guy. He wore a Chicago Cubs baseball cap backwards and a t-shirt with an enormous question mark on it. Already, I liked his style. "So this is the legendary Jim Hawkins of the Atlanta Central Jets. Bobby Moore, not-so-legendary catcher of the Greenpoint Falcons."

At this, I really loosened up. Another ball player. The other guy wore a "Flash" t-shirt, cut-off jeans, and black Chuck Taylor shoes. His black hair fell over his shoulders. He, too, shook my hand, but wasn't nearly as outspoken.

"Tim Duncan."

The four of us talked for a while, and they got me pointed in the right direction to get to my classes. I felt very comfortable around them. They were easy to laugh with. In my next four classes, I hardly spoke to anyone, and no one made any real effort to speak to me. But I knew I wouldn't be sitting alone at lunch.

When I hit the cafeteria, they weren't hard to find. Mostly

because Bobby yelled my name clear across the room, attracting tons of attention that I didn't really want. But that was just Bobby's style. I knew that already. Just like I knew that Tim wouldn't raise his voice even if he was set on fire, and that Freddy represented a middle ground between them. Still, as we sat there that afternoon, I did have some questions. I could see Bull and the other football players sitting together, and I could see most of those who I would later know to be the baseball players sitting together, and I could see the long-hairs sitting together. Yet here they were. The normal cliques I was so familiar with seemed to have missed these three completely. They were a unit among themselves. I envied them for the friendship they had. Before long, I came to realize that they were the closest friends I had ever seen, although they seemed to have nothing in common whatsoever.

That day after school, they followed me in Tim's car to Dad's restaurant. Tim was the established group driver. Within a couple weeks, he was coming by to pick me up for school, too. And every day, we went to Joe's Eatery, the restaurant that had brought me to Greenpoint. Dad would serve us our milkshakes, and we would talk about the things that were important to high school seniors. A friendship was being formed. A friendship from which home-town legends would be born.

CHAPTER 3

Things went pretty smoothly for a while. I found that if I worked at it carefully enough, I could almost tolerate living in that place. As I mentioned before, the guys and I would often hang out at Joe's Eatery, my dad's restaurant. This really wasn't a very unusual thing in itself. There wasn't exactly an overabundance of places to eat in Greenpoint. There certainly wasn't a McDonald's. Grandpa Hawkins opened the place about a million years ago, always intending for Dad to follow in his footsteps. From what I understand, he made Dad work there from around eighth grade on. Dad and I weren't incredibly close, and we didn't talk much, but I got the impression that Joe Sr. hit Joe Jr. with a pretty major guilt trip when he announced his intention to go to U of I and become a teacher. Mom told me once that it drove a huge wedge between them. Grandpa wouldn't support Dad financially all through school, and didn't exactly welcome him whenever he came home. Dad worked really hard to put himself through school, and came out of it minus a lot of his personality. My friend Chuck from Atlanta had a brother who had just about the same thing happen to him. Went to school determined to make something of himself, and worked himself half to death. He used to be a really fun, outgoing guy. Now...he acts like life is an awfully big burden. But, hey, he got his degree, and that's all that matters, right? I'm not so sure. Dad was just that way. Sometimes, I could almost see a fun, crazy guy trying to escape from inside him,

but it couldn't overcome the blocks Dad had put on it in order to achieve what he thought was success. I've always heard that a college education is expensive. I just never understood what the real costs can sometimes be.

All of this led to the fact that, all through high school, I didn't have much respect for my father. My feeling towards him seemed more like pity. But I was willing to put up with him as long as he was paying the bills and not bugging me too much. Things got worse when we moved to Greenpoint, though. Besides the initial resentment of forcing me to live in this dust bowl of a town, I could see Dad changing, in a way I didn't think was for the better. Whenever Joe Jr. talked to Joe Sr., he was always very submissive, as if he were trying to make up for that big act of defiance of wanting his own life. Now, here in Greenpoint, things got much worse. Although he was still bedridden, Grandpa Hawkins called Dad all the time, making sure business was good, and that he wasn't changing anything. Dad, I think for his dad's sake, always, and I mean always, acted like moving back to Greenpoint and running that place was the best thing that had ever happened to him. I couldn't decide if he was just putting on an act, or if Joe Sr. had put so much pressure on him that he was practically brainwashed and really thought he liked it. I tend to think the latter. I really thought Dad was just kidding himself, and that he was actually very unhappy with his life. But I usually wouldn't dwell on that for too long, because it always reminded me of how much pressure Dad has always put on me to play baseball.

And that, in turn, would make me wonder how much of my love for the game was my own, and not my fathers. Which then always led me to the conclusion that, no matter how hard we try, we always end up a lot like our parents. That was just too much to handle. At that point, I'd usually go and huddle beneath my Atlanta Braves comforter again and try to convince myself that there was still hope for humanity. To this day, I still think about that.

That was the state of mind I was in when Tims car pulled up on the first night of the September Celebration. Every year, at the end of September, the entire town of Greenpoint would kick off their shoes and party. Carnival rides, a parade, the works. I'm still not sure exactly what we were celebrating, but when you live in Greenpoint, you'll take any opportunity to celebrate you can.

Tim would have been quite content to discuss the issue of parental molding with me in great detail. He was pretty deep for a high school kid. But, of course, Bobby would have none of that. Not on September Celebration weekend. My brief moment of self-exploration disrupted, I prepared myself for the serious business of hanging out, meeting girls, and having fun.

I have to admit, the Celebration was a lot cooler than I thought. Everyone was there. I could never have pictured all these Greenpointians cutting loose and running around the way they all were. I was in fairly good form that night myself. There was a certain female at school that I had been flirting

with quite regularly. Her name was Michelle O'Rourke. Everybody called her Mickey, and she was the most outstanding female I had ever seen. She was the only person besides Freddy, Bobby, and Tim who had really gone out of her way to be nice to me. She rivaled Bobby for being outgoing and crazy, and also happened to be phenomenally beautiful. If she hadn't been so "friendly" to me, I probably would never have gotten up the guts to pursue anything with her. Back in Atlanta, I would have in a second. But somehow I just didn't feel comfortable yet doing that stuff in Greenpoint. When I ran into her at the merry go round, I knew it was going to be a good night.

I broke off from the guys for a bit and made my approach, mentally rehearsing what clever line I was going to open up with. But when I was only ten steps away, I saw another guy step up and make his move. It was Brian Brown. I only knew who he was because he had been the starting shortstop for Greenpoint last year, a position I was quite intent on stealing right out from under him. Apparently, he was intent on stealing something right out from under me as well. I was going to walk up and say something when I first noticed it. Mickey had jumped right into conversation with him, and was acting exactly like she did with me. I leaned against a ticket booth and watched for a few minutes. Yep, that was the exact same act. My fragile male ego collapsed all around me. Suddenly, I didn't feel so cocky. All I wanted to do was get away from the ugly scene unfolding before me.

I had totally lost track of the guys, so I just wandered

around the rides by myself for a while. Finally I saw a familiar face. It wasn't one of my three pals, but I would take just about anyone at the moment. His name was Dexter. I couldn't remember his last name, but we were in History together. We made casual conversation for a while, me commenting on his Sharks hockey jersey, and he on my Braves cap, which was my most prized possession. Finally, I got around to what I really wanted to talk about.

"Hey, Dexter, how well do you know Mickey O' Rourke?"

He smiled. "Pretty well. Who doesn't?"

I didn't like the way that sounded. From the rest of our conversation, I found that she treated almost every guy the same way she did me. She was, perhaps, the Greenpoint equivalent of the Atlanta Jim Hawkins. In that moment, she lost all appeal to me. How ironic.

As Dexter and I continued to talk, I noticed people looking at us. At first I ignored it, but when it persisted, I decided to find out what was up. I'd been in town for a while now, and my uniqueness had pretty much worn off.

"Dex, have you noticed everyone looking at us kind of funny?"

He nodded quickly. "Oh, yeah. They're probably surprised that you'd talk to me, being from the South and all. People cling desperately to their old biases most of the time."

This whole night, I had been noticing and discovering things. Now it was time for the biggest revelation of all.

Dexter was black. You have to understand how I could have

missed this obvious fact. Atlanta Central had a large population of African-American students. My next door neighbors were black. It's just where I lived. I saw and talked to and hung out with black people so much, I guess I just stopped differentiating. That's one good thing I can say about myself the way I used to be: I was, and am still, completely non-prejudiced, about race at least.

"Wait a minute," I said, "you mean to tell me that a guy from the deep south can come up to the great Yankee state of Illinois and find racism?"

Dexters response really got to me. "Jim, it doesn't matter where you go, South or North, big town or small, people are people, and some people are always going to be racists."

I was truly amazed. I don't think I was really naive, but I had indeed seen some pretty powerful race hatred going on down south, but I had always figured that all these northern states, which had made such a big deal about racist issues throughout history, would be better than that.

I wound up losing some potential friends for hanging out with Dexter that night. When we found Freddy, Bobby, and Tim, the five of us ran around together for the rest of the night. Apparently the friends that were really worth something didn't buy into the whole racism thing. What great people those three were. I decided that night that I wanted to be a better person, to be more like my friends there in Greenpoint. I had never really known people like them before.

That night at the September Celebration stayed in my head

for a long time. I learned some hard lessons. But the hardest lessons were still to come.

CHAPTER 4

It was about four P.M. on a surprisingly warm October afternoon. I told Mom I was going out for a walk before dinner, mostly to get out of the house and away from her for a while. It was one of those rare days when all three of my best pals were busy with other stuff, and it couldn't have come on a worse day. It was absolutely beautiful out. I just couldn't stand it. So off I went.

Going on walks isn't a normal Jim Hawkins activity. Not even remotely. But it was a good chance for me to think about some of the things that were going on in my life. Things with the guys were going great. Greenpoint was having a great football season, partly attributed to the Falcon's savage defense, led by Nose Tackle Morton "Bull" Franks and Linebacker Freddy Thompson. My classes weren't especially difficult. My parents weren't really interfering with me too much. They seemed to trust me enough to let me have pretty free reign. But something was definitely missing. Something very important. And that something was spelled W-O-M-A-N. I had completely given up on Mickey O'Rourke. There was no telling who she was with this week. No, what was needed here was someone brand new. Someone I had no background with. Around there, that surely wouldn't be too much of a problem. But who?

I paused as a moving van backed out of a driveway just ahead of me. As it cleared the yard, my eyes fell on something very interesting. Someone, actually. She was sitting on the

porch steps of her powder blue house. She was wearing a purple sweater and blue jeans. Her hair was blonde, but I couldn't quite determine her eye color. One thing was certain, however: she was gorgeous. Not with the same overpowering beauty that was Mickey's. Oh, no. This was a simple, honest beauty. A beauty to inspire poetry. A beauty to make you do stupid things. Like stand on the sidewalk staring at her for so long that you can't tell how much time has passed. I snapped out of my trance and quickly strode onward, her amused smile following me all the while. I rounded the first possible corner, losing sight of her. Four seconds later, I had come back around it and was retracing my steps, aware of her watching me all the while.

When I reached the concrete path leading to her house, I turned abruptly and walked up to the steps she was seated upon. She smiled. I smiled.

"Hi," I said, trying to sound friendly, but not quite desperate. "My name's Jim. I gather you just moved here?"

"Yes. We just got here from Springfield. My name is Karen. It's nice to meet you, Jim."

With those historic words, something great was begun. I stood at those steps for probably an hour and a half. We had something in common, both being new to Greenpoint. I could tell she needed a friend as badly as I had. Things were going great until I happened to glance at her watch and see that I was an hour late for dinner. In Mary Hawkins' house, that was certain death.

It was obvious what had to be done. "Say, Karen," I said

innocently, "I'm gonna' have to run. I hate to cut our conversation off so soon, but my parents are expecting me for dinner. Could we perhaps continue this later...say, Friday night?"

She smiled once again, and I knew I was in.

I really felt something as I walked home that evening. I felt like she and I had potential. Real potential, not that stupid crud I used to pull in Atlanta. I just had a feeling that she and I had big stuff in store for us. I didn't know the half of it...

CHAPTER 5

Snow.

Lots of it.

In fact, I'd never seen so much snow in my life. It was everywhere, covering the ground in a solid, wavy sheet of whiteness. This was one aspect of Northern Illinois that this Georgia boy hadn't prepared himself for. It was wild.

Christmas time had quickly snuck up on the Hawkins family. Before I knew it, I was scrambling to buy presents for the family, friends, and girlfriend. Yes, girlfriend. My first date with Karen had gone perfectly, and we had kept things going for a month and a half. She was amazing. Unlike any girl I had ever been with before. Things were...progressing nicely, I guess you could say. I was gently, patiently putting on the little micro-levels of pressure that the guy always does, and she was giving the standard levels of resistance, giving up inch by inch. I found myself being surprisingly patient, and moving incredibly slowly considering the way I had been in Atlanta. And I was satisfied with that.

For the most part, anyway. I had pretty much begun a life for myself in Greenpoint at long last. I had a handful of great friends, and I had the coolest girlfriend I'd ever dated. But I still felt that something wasn't quite right. I still felt an empty space inside, a gap that simply hadn't been there before. What was it doing there now? And what the heck is was it going to take to fill it? Maybe, I thought, I was just

anxious for baseball to start. Practices would be starting immediately after Christmas break, and I was ready. But somehow, this hole inside me didn't seem to be baseball-shaped. The question still lingered within me. The answer would be forthcoming, but it wasn't anything like I expected.

It was four days before Christmas, and Freddy, Bobby, and Tim had invited me to a Christmas party over at Greenpoint Christian Church, where, it turned out, they were all members of the youth group. I figured that this was probably the thing that these three had in common, and it sort of surprised me that they hadn't invited me to some sort of function earlier. In fact, I really didn't even know that they were particularly religious. I sure wasn't. But I knew that as long as I was with these guys I'd have a blast, church thing or otherwise.

Greenpoint Christian Church was a very large church, the largest in the county. It was mostly brown brick, and ornamented with some of the most beautiful stained glass windows you'll ever see. I'd never been inside it, but I'd driven past it every day (but then again, I drove past everything in Greenpoint every day). When we walked through the glass front doors, I could almost feel the energy that matched the sounds coming from the basement: the sound of teen-agers having a good time. We headed down the carpeted stairs into an enormous room. It was slightly dim, but decorated by what seemed like thousands of tiny, multi-colored light bulbs. Every head turned as we entered. I knew each one of them, but the number and odd grouping of them surprised me. There were at least twenty-five

kids in here, all from different high school social groups. Skaters stood with nerds, hoods stood with preppys, and every other possible combination. All of them smiled and said "hi" as we walked through them.

We spent an hour hanging out and mingling, and nearly every person in the room came up and spoke to me personally, telling me they were glad I could make it. I felt very comfortable, and easily joined in with the large amount of laughter that echoed through the room. Suddenly, one voice rang out over the others.

"Hey, everybody, he's here! Matt's here!"

Everyone immediately crowded towards the stairs, and the sound of footsteps clapping down the stairs silenced the room. A pair of Reebok tennis shoes appeared, followed by blue jeans and a white t-shirt that read "CARPE DIEM." As he completed his descent, his face finally became visible. He had fair skin, bright blue eyes, and brown hair that ran down the length of his neck, not quite as long as Tim's. A dangling silver cross glinted from his left ear. He smiled.

A loud chorus of greetings came from the group, and he was swarmed by handshakes and hugs. Freddy filled me in as he awaited his turn to welcome Matt. Matt Bryant had been the president of their youth group, but left at the end of the summer on a mission trip. A national Christian organization had selected a small group of teens to spend a semester in Africa, attending school over there and spending the rest of their time doing volunteer work and witnessing. Somehow Matt had been

one of the teens that made the cut. He had just returned today, and this was the first place he came.

The crowd eventually cleared away from him and broke back into conversational groups. It was then that he saw me. He immediately strode across the room. He smiled and extended his hand as he spoke.

"Hi, my name's Matt Bryant. I don't believe I know you."

That made me blink. In a town this small, you don't hear that phrase very often. Especially if you're the new guy. I smiled back and shook his hand.

"I'm Jim Hawkins, Matt. It's nice to meet you."

With those words, a long conversation started. Matt knew absolutely nothing about me, and I knew very little about him either. As we talked, I was amazed at how open I was with him, as if I began trusting him completely the second we met. He was genuinely interested in hearing all about life, and asked some pretty personal questions. But I never hesitated to answer them. In turn, he told me quite a bit about himself. He had quite a story to tell. I learned about his childhood, his school life, his dating history, and his involvement with the youth group. There was one thing, though, that stood out more than anything else. He mentioned God in every other sentence. I'd never heard anyone, not even a minister, do that. His entire trip to Africa had been a complete leap of faith, and he was so eager to tell me what God had done for him and through him there. This was all completely foreign to me. To me, God was in churches, and since I never went to them, God and I didn't

have much to do with each other. Matt told a different story. To him, God was a part of daily life, and in charge of most of it. I thought I would be really put off by talk like that, but I found myself listening intently. What he was saying seemed to make a lot of sense. Matt came across as someone who really had it all together. He had purpose in his life, but he wasn't some religious nut-boy. He was just as down to earth as anyone else. And he wasn't a stiff, like I would expect some guys who had adopted what I perceived to be a big set of extra rules to be. He was happy and outgoing.

I really can't say how long we talked, but it was a decent chunk of time. We were finally interrupted by Steve, the group's youth director. Steve was probably twenty-three or four, and had been working for the church since he graduated from U of I. He was sitting in a big rocking chair next to the brightly decorated Christmas tree. The youth gathered and sat in a semi-circle on the floor around him. Matt and I sat right up front. I felt like a little kid at story time.

Steve did tell a story that night. An old familiar one, about a young couple named Joseph and Mary, and the humble beginnings of a child unlike any other. Even I had heard this story a few times, but it had never affected me like it did then. Staring down at the nativity scene under the tree, I could almost feel the cold night air. Smell the musty straw. Hear the bleats and moos of the animals and the shufflings of shepherd's feet. See the light from an especially bright star shining through the window. And I could experience the

incredible hope contained within a tiny boy asleep in a manger.

I don't remember much of what happened after that. I sat in silence as Tim drove us home, and barely mumbled a good-bye before I shuffled up my snowy walk. I lay awake a long time that night, slowly recognizing the shape of that empty space inside me. Things were never the same after that.

CHAPTER 6

"Hey, guys, here he comes!"

Those were the first words I heard as I walked out onto the field. It was an especially warm day for early spring, and I was decked out in sweats and my sacred Braves cap. My trusty, well-worn ball glove enclosed my hand like a familiar friend. It was the first day of try-outs for the baseball team, and I was ready. I casually scanned the group of hopefuls, allowing my gaze to rest only a moment longer on Brian Brown. His face hid no secrets. He and I would be dueling with each other for the next month over the position we had both played our entire high school careers. Time to go to work.

For the next month, that's just what I did. And I had my work cut out for me. Brian was good. No, I take that back. He was GREAT. Day in and day out we would stage our private war on the third baseline, digging and diving all over creation, each trying to outdo the other. We streaked around the bases, faster than we thought possible. We batted until we couldn't raise our arms above our waists. I could see that he wanted it as badly as I did. Never had I faced a more worthy adversary.

After practices, I would drive Bobby (who had already secured his spot as starting catcher) home and then try to get to the table in time for dinner myself. After resting up for a little bit, I would usually meet up with the guys at some place or another, wherever the hang-out spot for the night was. Things were just like always, except that Matt was always with

us now. It seemed that I had stepped in to fill his spot in the inseparable friends group. But I never felt like I was out of the club when he returned. I guess I made my own place in the gang, and they were as glad to have me as I was to have them. I had begun going to youth group meetings with them, and occasionally even Sunday morning church services, and was making a lot of new friends there as well. I noticed a few changes because of this, the main one being that our conversations turned towards God and spiritual matters much more often. I didn't mind it, but I did feel out of place sometimes, like I wasn't quite in on the whole idea. No way came to mind for me to bring this up, so I just kept my mouth shut and listened more often than not.

As team try-outs came to a close, I worked harder and harder to beat Brian out. There was no point that whole time that I felt certain I would win. I just kept trying and hoping. By now, the whole school had heard about our little feud, and some people were even taking sides. What amazed me was that I had some on mine. It was nice, but the pressure became even greater.

Overall, I think that pre-season war with Brian did a lot for me. He made me work harder than I ever had before. I couldn't just sit back and rely on my talent. We did each other a lot of good.

Unfortunately, when it comes to starting spots, there can only be one winner, and that wound up being me. Brian was moved over to third base, which upset him to no end. I think he wanted

to quit, but Coach Woodson wouldn't hear of it. We were two of his best players, and he was determined to turn us into a team.

That night we went out to celebrate my victory. The five of us went to Dad's restaurant, then headed over to the park, where we sat on the playground equipment and talked about life. Before long, the talk turned to God once again. This time I decided to speak my mind.

"Hey, Matt, can I ask you something?"

Matt smiled, as if he had been expecting this to happen. "Sure, Jim. What's on your mind?"

I hesitated, not sure how to proceed. "Well," I began, "we've been talking a lot about God and stuff recently....and it seems like you guys and I aren't....I don't know. You talk about God so personally, and seem to be so close to each other because of your relationship with Him. I feel like we're not on the same wavelength, I guess."

The others looked at Matt, waiting for him to respond. He lowered his head as if collecting his thoughts for a moment before he responded. Finally, he looked up, and when he spoke, it was with quiet confidence. "Jim, have you ever been saved? Have you accepted Jesus Christ into your heart as your personal Lord and Saviour?"

Suddenly, I felt very ashamed. "Uh...no. I'm not even sure how."

Matt only smiled again. "Well, do you believe in God? And that Jesus is His Son?"

Pieces began to come together. Although I never really had believed in any of the above before, I did now. "Yes," I said.

Matt nodded calmly. "O.K. Let me ask you this. Do you realize that you are a sinner, and that if you don't receive forgiveness for your sins, that you have a less than bright future ahead of you?"

I started recalling the youth director's words of the last few weeks, about the basics of Christianity, and the trouble we have gotten ourselves into through our actions. "Yes, I think I do".

Matt's next words shook me to the very corners of my existence. "Do you want to live like that anymore, Jim?"

I could feel a gentle tugging inside me, a quiet calling to something greater. "No."

Matt smiled again. "Well then, would you like to pray with me? Right here, right now is as good a place as any. Would you like to do something about where you're standing in the grand scheme of things?"

Suddenly, it all made sense. All of it. I knew what it was that held Freddy, Bobby, Tim, and Matt together, like brothers. I understood why they, and so many others, could be so happy to be where they were in life. I could see, in a flash of insight, what it was that had been missing from my life. And I was ready to do something about it.

That night, in Greenpoint Central Park, beside the jungle gym, Jim Hawkins accepted Christ. He, and the other young

Christians with him, kneeled on the grassy ground, and he prayed the most beautiful, most sincere prayer he ever had.

In that one, shining moment, my life was changed forever. Jesus entered my life, bringing his peace and love with him. I felt at peace with all around me, and, for once, I felt at peace with myself. Things would be different from now on.

CHAPTER 7

Did you ever have a period of your life flash by so fast that you scarcely had a moment to breathe? That's what the baseball season is like for me every year. When you play up to three games a week, plus practices, plus school, plus homework, plus youth group things, plus hanging with friends, plus seeing the girlfriend, plus working in the little bit of time you have left over, you can consider yourself to be a fairly busy person. I know it seems like a lot to do, but baseball is, and always has been, a part of my soul, and it will not be denied it's place in my life.

School was going great. I had become pretty popular almost overnight. Of course, that will happen when you hit one right over the fence in your first game, with the whole school watching. Graduation was rapidly approaching, and was only days off.

Things with Karen were outstanding. I was still blown away by how strong my feelings for her were. Every day, she would amaze and impress me in some way or another. I'd never felt that way about anyone. Our senior prom was one of the most incredible moments that had ever occurred in the history of mankind.

Baseball was more than great. The Greenpoint Falcons (darned right I'm a falcon!) had battled their way to a 22 and 2 record, the best in school history. They held the regional record for least runs allowed, which could be greatly attributed

to the awesome defensive wall of third baseman Brian Brown and shortstop Jim Hawkins. The coach had done what he had vowed to. Brian and I were forced to work together every day, despite the animosity everyone knew existed between us. Once again, we were very good for each other. Once we got over our attitudes and started working as a team, there was no stopping us. We had a very talented team that year. Bobby and Brian were both batting over .350, and I finished the regular season with a phenomenal .398, my best ever. The state championships were next week, and, after taking the playoffs by storm, we were ready to go to Springfield and take it all.

But the greatest area of my life, even better than baseball (if that's possible), was the time I spent with my friends and with God. After that night at the park, I was a different person. I take all of my commitments very seriously, and this was no exception. I studied the Bible every chance I had. I prayed whenever I could. I even found the time to pray as I was walking up to the plate during games. Maybe that's why my average was so high. And, I talked to Matt. He was amazing. To this day, I have never seen anyone with faith like his. Every time I would get confused about something, or get a little off track with God, Matt would be right there. He'd get me set straight in no time flat. Sometimes I couldn't help but wonder if he was an angel, sent down just to help me out. I would wonder every time I watched him stroll down the sidewalk away from my house if he simply faded away after he rounded the corner.

I was doing great with God for a long time, walking tall and playing by the rules. Until graduation night. The graduation itself was like a million other high school graduations; speeches, stupid caps and gowns, and boredom. The real action began at the graduation party that night. A guy named Jake Thompson lived on a farm on the outskirts of town, and was our host for the evening. His parents owned an old barn out in the woods, and that became ground zero for one of the biggest shin-digs in recent years. I arrived there with Karen around 9:00, with permission to stay out all night tucked firmly under my belt. After all, I was a high school graduate, and, therefore, a man of the world. The party was in full swing when I got there, and we just jumped right into things. It didn't take long for it to start to happen, though. This was the first big drunken bash I'd attended since I left Atlanta, and my instincts were to grab a beer or twelve and get to it. I didn't really think that there was anything wrong with having a little drink every once in a while, but I didn't want to have a little drink. Chances were fairly good that even if I started with one little drink, it would quickly escalate. I couldn't believe how much I wanted to. Everyone around me tried to push a beer into my hand, and I had to really struggle not to take it each time. The worst part of all came when I finally found Matt and the guys sitting on some hay bales in the corner. They were watching the party, talking and laughing. Not a beer among them. I felt so inferior for having such a problem with this. I was ashamed to even go talk to them.

Karen noticed I didn't seem to be having a very good time.

"Jim? Are you okay? You look stressed."

I fought to flash her a smile. "Yeah, I'm alright. I've just got a lot on my mind right now."

She nodded understandingly. "Do you want to get out of here for a while?"

I smiled genuinely this time. She was so cool. "Yeah, that'd be good, I think."

We left the party and drove around for a while, quietly talking about the future and our relationship. Eventually, we ended up at the Point. It was a high, tree covered hill that overlooked the whole town. I would imagine that this was the "point" in "Greenpoint."

There was only one thing that young couples really did at the point. Karen and I had been up here a decent number of times, and it wasn't hard to lose myself in her kiss. After a while, things started to happen. Things that had never happened before. I finally stopped long enough to ask her in a whisper what was going on. Her whispered response threw me for the biggest loop yet. Lying wrapped in my arms, warm and secure, she told me that she had thought things over, and she was ready. She wanted to go all the way with me. I was absolutely speechless. I knew she had never done it before, and the fact that she wanted to now just....wow. I was so awed that she could care for me that much. I was becoming more and more certain every day of just exactly how I felt about her. It seemed only natural that things should progress like this.

Then something hit me. Something that had never bothered me before in situations like this, and I was about as far from a virgin as one could get. It's called a conscience, and it started speaking to me like I couldn't believe. Before, having sex was no big deal. But now.... Now I was a Christian, and I knew better. We had talked about it a million times in youth group and among the guys. Ignorance was one thing, but now I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this wasn't something God wanted me doing.

A wave of guilt washed over me, greater than I had ever known. Guilt for all the girls I had been with before who had meant nothing to me. And guilt for all the subtle pressure I had put on Karen until recently. I felt so bad I thought I was going to be sick.

I laid there for a long time, not saying a word. I just looked into her eyes. And, finally, I spoke my heart.

"Karen....I know I've been kind of pushing us in this direction ever since we started going out, and I'm really glad you feel strongly enough for me to be ready to do this now.

But...all this time, I've been wrong. The standards I had back in Atlanta were all I'd ever known. But now I know that sex before marriage is wrong. Just wrong. It's very much against what God wants for me right now. It's not that I don't want to, believe me. I just can't. I'm sorry. If you want to shoot me for giving you such mixed signals, you can. I certainly deserve it."

We drove down the road back to the party in silence. She

— had said very little, but it was enough. She was glad I felt the way I did, and was more than willing to do things my way. So things were okay. It was Jim and Karen, now and forever. She said she respected me more than ever for making a stand like that. I knew that, looking down on my car speeding down the dark country road, God felt the same way.

After that, the party was a breeze for me to handle. We met up with my friends and had a spectacular time, dancing and laughing the night away. Things finally wound down around sunrise, and I left to drive Karen home. We stood holding each other on the portch where we first met for a long time.

— I had made my first real stand for God that night. It would be the first of many. For all of us. In the fall, my friends scattered in all directions, as high school friends tend to do.

Tim ended up in an art school somewhere out in Oregon. He graduated with honors, and, last I heard, was drawing for Marvel Comics. He'd always wanted to do something like that. I know he was happy.

Bobby went to the University of Tennessee on a baseball scholarship. He was good, but never wanted to play pro ball. I got a call from him just the other day. He's doing social work in New York City, of all places, and called to tell me that he and his wife had just had their first son. He sounded happy, too.

Freddy had a similar story for the history books. He went on to play football for Notre Dame with good old "Bull" Franks.

Freddy became a Biology teacher, and Bull got drafted in the third round of the NFL picks. I think I read in the paper that he was playing for the New Orleans Saints. I sure am glad he never got around to killing me.

Matt and I still talk every month or so. To no one's surprise, after college, he attended Asbury Seminary in Kentucky, and is now preaching in Alabama. He's still the greatest Christian to walk the face of the earth.

I would have to say that the guys probably see me more often than I see them, especially if they watch ESPN. After I hit the game-winning home run in the final game of the state championship, the college recruiters came calling from all over the place. I could have had a free ride to just about anywhere, but I ended up at the University of Illinois, as much to show my respect to Dad as anything else. I played four years of great ball for them, and was a first round pick by the San Diego Padres. Talk about living your dream! It's not the Braves, of course, but it's a good start.

Each one of us, regardless of profession, stayed true to God, and did our best to reflect him in our lives in some way, be it teaching Sunday School, or being youth group sponsors, or even just being the best possible everyday Christians we could. I've never had friends like I did in high school, and I've never forgotten that it was God who made us what we were.

And Karen? I hear she's doing well. She's a successful business woman in Indianapolis, happily married with two kids. I guess when it comes to high school sweethearts, forever isn't

always such a long time.

I've never forgotten her, though. After I dropped her off that morning, I drove around with a head full of happy thoughts for quite a while. It was mid-morning when I pulled into my driveway, and the sun was already high enough to signal that it was going to be a hot day. I stood out at the curb, looking up and down Milton street, feeling exhaustion not so very different from when I first arrived here. I smiled to think of what a disaster I deemed it then. Now, I could see that it was certainly the best thing that had ever happened to me. Greenpoint wasn't such a bad place, and God certainly hadn't forgotten it. God doesn't forget anybody.